

MA MAJOR RESEARCH PAPER

REROUTING NETWORKS:  
Promise and impediment in virtual social capital models.

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## Introduction

It would be inaccurate to suggest that the societal amalgam created when democracy and media combine is something novel, or for that matter that it has ever truly been novel. Democracy and civil life, as the modern conceptualizations of those notions are typically understood, are bound to the idea that there exists not merely the functional devices of citizenry actively participating in the selection and implementation of governing, but that there also be a formidable, effective and widespread medium of one sort or another – or more than one – present. A product of society and culture, democracy cannot feasibly exist on an individual level, but only in a community and community, in turn, must be tethered together by commonly shared communicative threads (Van Benschoten 2000). Democracy, theoretically understood as it is based on the notion of citizens making informed decisions and choices about which manner and by which policies they themselves wish to be governed, must therefore thrive only on a framework which includes the allowance for a technology which provides for the effective dissemination of ideas to the citizens. In any other model, democracy would necessarily be undermined. There would exist a gap in the education in the abilities of different citizens to participate: those democrats fortunate enough to live in proximity to the major population centers, particularly those with real political relevance, would be more likely to directly have access to information about politicians and candidates, while citizens distanced from political centres by geographic barriers (agricultural workers would obviously be a predominant segment of just such a group) would similarly be distanced from the political process, bereft of any reliable means with which to equip themselves with the information they arguably need to make the educated electoral choices that are

critical to the process of civic membership. This is particularly true, not only as it pertains to electing representatives – in which case candidates can often originate within regional proximity to voters, as is the case with Canadian members of parliament, and therefore will campaign regionally -- but additionally it is vital that citizens are kept abreast of the issues of the day and the performance of their elected officials once they are given power. Governmental responsibility is, if not a direct function of citizen proximity, then necessarily a function of citizen access to reliable channels of mass communication.

Recently, attention has focused on the critical link between social capital and democracy, an idea most comprehensively put forward in Robert Putnam's 2000 book *Bowling Alone* (Putnam 2000). Beginning with an understanding that social networks have value, the idea of social capital is premised on the assumption that the collective of social networks produce benefits which accrue to a society, and that among those benefits there is a positive effect on the strength and quality of democratic processes in jurisdictions where those models exist (Putnam 2000). Social networks are naturally mediated by a variety of communication forms, though Putnam is largely convinced that the most effective of these forms is inter-personal and physical communication (schmoozing) (Putnam 2000: 93). In this monograph, I aim to examine the possibilities and problems inherent in electronic forms of communication, specifically Internet-based media, as they apply to recent efforts to recreate social capital within non-physical communities. Genuine opportunities to observe the phenomenon of electronically-enabled socialization and politicization are available to scholars today in abundance as never before. Starting with the most visible example of the Internet as a site of political

organization in America today, Howard Dean's campaign for the Democratic party's presidential nomination I will attempt to illustrate how organizations and individuals are attempting to exploit the technology of the world wide web to transform the patterns of communications in politics from the historic centralized top-down model into something with more influence from the grassroots and the effect it has had in terms of reintegrating certain individuals into the political process. From there, I will follow with a critical review of the original social capital hypothesis put forward by Putnam so as to work toward a practical understanding of how we can most accurately identify truly helpful forms of social capital, as it relates to the democratic process, with a particular emphasis on the strengths and weaknesses which exist within the more conventional conceptions of social capital that make up the bulk of Putnam's work. It is critical to this analysis in particular to examine the nature of the connection between conventional forms of social capital in the U.S. and the country's salubrious democratic tradition and why Putnam feels the symbiotic relationship between the two social structures is falling into disrepair. The idealized notion of what constitutes a vibrant American democracy and how it manifests itself, I hope to show, is something that is bound intrinsically to cultural and generational biases and is open to scrutiny. A more critical approach to the sort of attributes that Putnam ascribes to social capital structures in the Golden Age of American civility can lead us to vastly different conclusions about what role was played by social, ethnic, political and professional clubs in the post-war period. I will show that social capital structures in the past have come with negative, exclusionary and anti-social effects while social capital structures in the modern era go largely unobserved as they fail to conform to the rather limited parameters set out by Putnam and his acolytes. In

addition to revisiting and appraising Putnam's hypotheses regarding the changing nature of familial and work structures in America, I intend to critique his overarching thesis that electronic forms of communication – namely, television – have an a detrimental effect on American democracy. I will itemize additional considerations which suggest that the arguments that mass electronic media is necessarily the most destructive force in terms of the breakdown of civil society are questionable. By exploring in particular the peculiar structure of Internet-enabled communication, with its paradoxical potential both for individual empowerment and the entrenchment of corporate and state powers, I expect to challenge Putnam's implication that the American social capital experience is something which is reliant on the physical intercourse between individuals by citing evidence which shows the existence of apparently genuine social capital experiences brokered through electronic media, most notably, the Internet, as is consistent with Habermas' early conceptualizations of accessible public forums so critical to our understanding of democracy. The social capital framework will be applied to electronic community structures to evaluate how novel virtual 'societies' compare against geographically-bound associations in terms of their effects on democracy, based on the criteria set out by Putnam. More notably, I will demonstrate that by its nature, 'virtual' social capital avoids the same class, cultural and of course, physical limitations that exist in more traditional organizational forms. I will reframe the social capital debate by reinterpreting electronic mass media not as "leisure," as is Putnam's wont, but as a source of news, and therefore as a critical element in the democratic process, enhanced by the technological advances which allow the audience an increasingly sophisticated news experience, if they should choose it. The advent of the 'blog' – or web log – will be considered as a

fascinating example of the modern opinion leader superceding centralized controls inherent in traditional forms of mass media and utilizing modern news technologies to politicize and motivate groups and to effect change on a broad societal level. At the same time, I will elucidate the several and significant challenges that are unique to the electronically-mediated society and which present additional and novel challenges to the democratic experience. Notably, I intend to reflect on the role of the state and industrial entities which must enable the mediated experience and the vulnerability of this most modern post-industrial forum to surveillance and control by economic and political interests which might run counter to the democratic good. In addition I will highlight the economic and infrastructure barriers that often limit the accessibility of Internet and other similar technologies to the public at large and the implications those barriers present in terms of legitimizing new forms of social capital.

### Maturation of On-Line Communities in the 2004 Election Campaign

There exists a series of what are accepted as milestones in the transformation of media as it relates to the political process -- such as Roosevelt's innovative and effective use of radio fireside chats in 1933 and the pioneering adaptation by Kennedy to the television age in 1960 and the introduction of live, televised press conference (Rich 2003). When political scientists and historians acknowledge and examine these moments, what they are recognizing however is not any change, in the revolutionary sense, but rather something resembling more a shift in form. The evolution of media as it has unfolded historically, from print to audio to video, may have some especially dramatic feel to it. But up to a point, all modifications to the mass media up until recently

have left intact the nature and route of the information, altering instead the speed and richness with which that same information is relayed. That transmission originates centrally and is disseminated widely has traditionally been an unchanging and seeming unchangeable law in mass communication, yet the development of the Internet as applied to political communication, appears truly unique and genuinely subversive in that it is the first mass media technology which enables not only the politician to communicate to the "mass", but also the "mass" to communicate in turn with the politician. More importantly, however, it permits the "mass" to communicate just as easily amongst itself, utilizing the Internet as a site of communal organization. The 2004 US Presidential Election, with primaries currently underway to select a Democratic is the first into which the Internet has entrenched itself not merely as yet one more communications medium, but as a disruptor of established political processes. The website Meetup.com, which advertises that it facilitates the organization of "local gatherings about anything, anywhere," is being effectively used by the campaign team of Democratic presidential hopeful Howard Dean as a powerful mobilization tool to link together supporters of Dean's bid who might otherwise find themselves dispersed and unconnected and, more to the point, bring them together physically to meet, for the first time, and marshal their individual energies to collectively rally and promote the interests of the Dean camp. Other Democratic candidates have employed the Internet in a fashion, nor is this the first election campaign to utilize the world wide web in some manner (Economist 2003: 32). Still, typically this sort of political activity, while employing a leading technology, nevertheless, predictably mimics the model of its media predecessors, print and broadcast, as organization, administration and communication begin at the centralized

source, in this case, likely campaign headquarters, and transmitted with authority to the grassroots. What, therefore, appears authentically subversive about the nature of the Meetup/Dean model is the attempt to restructure and indeed, upturn the old paradigm. Of the key ways in which the web has been found to effectively alter political organization identified in studies by Foot and Schneider, the “opportunity for citizens to mobilize others...convert[ing] silent supporters into vocal advocates who persuade others,” is among the most direct changes (Foot and Schneider 2003). Nor is Dean’s capitalization of this opportunity at all accidental: there are, consulting on the campaign, a number of serious thinkers on the subject of digital society and social capital, including David Weinberger, Doc Searls and Howard Rheingold (Shapiro 2003) and the pro-Dean effort is, deliberately inspired by – and designed also to fully exploit -- the Internet’s own rather anarchic configuration:

*At the headquarters of most political campaigns, there's a familiar organizational structure: a group of junior employees carrying out a plan devised by a bunch of senior advisers. Joe Trippi, Dean's campaign manager, says the campaign's structure is modeled on the Internet, which is organized as a grid, rather than as spokes surrounding a hub... the power lies with the people at "the edges of the network," rather than the center. When people from the unofficial campaign call and ask permission to undertake an activity on behalf of Dean, they are told they don't need permission (Shapiro 2003: 56).*

Rheingold has argued that Meetup represents the “perfect example of a smart mob,” an electronically-mediated form of association first laid out in Rheingold’s 2002 book *Smart Mobs*, in which he identifies and argues for the Internet’s “enabling of likeminded people who don’t know each other to get together” (Skinner 2004, Rheingold 2002). It is important to note here that, despite the idealist overtones implied in the



aforementioned article, and which are not at all uncommon when it comes to the Dean camp and the popular discourse which increasingly surrounds it, at this site, where social capital and electronic grassroots media allegedly meet, there are present also the conscienceless interests of politics and commerce. Undoubtedly there exists an undercurrent of Americans, disenfranchised from the undisguised venality of big-time US politics, who have accepted that the Meetup phenomenon represents some new form of political voice, enabling them to reclaim their civic agency (Franke-Ruta 2003). But the ability to create meaningful virtual communities is something that appears to be of explicit interest not merely to political scientists and sociologists or the disenfranchised but also to the technology industry, at least as much or probably more. At least this seems almost certain, not simply because the logic of the media marketplace would only lead one to that natural conclusion (the capturing of the eyeballs that open the gates to the virtual community on the computer monitor) but because there are millions of dollars being invested in myriad web-based software products like Meetup and Friendster (Shapiro 2003). Rheingold runs a consulting company where he advises private corporations on managing virtual networks in their organizations ([www.rheingold.com/Associates](http://www.rheingold.com/Associates)).

Meetup.com is not exclusively a political vehicle and it reserves most of its bandwidth for more proletarian pursuits: Barbie Collectors, Poodle Owners, Japanese speakers -- nor is this unimportant in the larger context of democracy and societal strength (Meetup.com). Civic society, it is often hypothesized, is built on the foundation of myriad groups of diverse and often-diverging interests. But the Meetup website's origins are political; an offshoot of Moveon.org, where the stated purpose is as follows:

“MoveOn is working to bring ordinary people back into politics. With a system that today revolves around big money and big media, most citizens are left out. When it becomes clear that our “representatives” don’t represent the public, the foundations of democracy are in peril. MoveOn is a catalyst for a new kind of grassroots involvement, supporting busy but concerned citizens in finding their political voice” (Moveon.org). That website (or ‘movement’) was started in response to the protracted impeachment of then-president Bill Clinton in 1998 after the Monica Lewinsky scandal by Silicon Valley Screen Saver entrepreneurs Joan Blades and Wes Boyd. It began with a 1998 e-mail to about 300 people; today the group has 1.4 million members (Franke-Ruta 2003). The group employed what it called “Flash Campaigns” to influence Congress on the matter. The Censure and Move On Flash Campaign utilized a convergence of e-mail, phone and fax technologies to raise money and lobby Congress with petitions to influence their vote on impeachment (see Appendix A). MoveOn claims also have raised \$6.5 million for like-minded candidates and generated a million phone calls and e-mails to Congress protesting the Iraq war and claims to have inspired thousands of candlelight vigils around the world (Von Drehle 2003). The disruptive capacities of the new media in the most establishmentarian of political arenas has surprised many of Dean’s rivals as well as the mainstream mass media which both initially dismissed the effort as lacking in genuine consequence, with one television pundit remarking typically that the “Internet has yet to mature as a political tool” (Rich 2003: AL1). As of the end of 2003, Howard Dean’s treasury has been filled to the tune of \$25 million, the most of all the Democratic candidates, raised not from large contributions, but overwhelmingly from individuals, with an average donation of \$77 (Shapiro 2003: 56).

There is certainly a novelty to the MoveOn and Meetup phenomena, insofar as the Internet's central role as a channel for social participation in the political process is concerned. Some argue that the websites are derivative of traditional manifestations of social capital, building on and in a way, reproducing the social dynamics of nonprofit and movement-based organizations that have been the dominant means of civic participation by the political left in America since the 1960s (Franke-Ruta 2003). And the Internet has been utilized on smaller scales by political communities to create and enhance networks (Puro 2002). That being said, the United States is presently facing a particularly significant moment in the history of civic society: at the very least there is currently underway an attempt to metamorphose the nature of civically-bound social structures from purely physical manifestations to hybrid structures comprised of a substantial "virtual" element. The consequences are clearly unpredictable, but there is a potential that there will be a dramatic alteration in the fabric of American democracy. At least, that is the foreseeable outcome based on the hypothesis that the vitality of Western democracy is beholden to the vigor of the social capital networks of its citizens.

### The Social Capital Connection: Democracy as a Product of Networks

As Putnam clarifies, there are myriad effects when social networks are productive, one of which is the creation of an active civil society – that is, a community wherein individuals take ownership of their citizenship and assume an active role in bettering their communal station and accept the responsibilities of that on both a collective and personal level (Putnam 2000). Understanding the relationship between social capital and civic engagement begins with an acknowledgement that not all nations enjoy identical degrees

of civic engagement, and the realization that contributing factors inherent in the cultural fabric of a given society is likely an important place to seek those specific elements which differentiate one civil society from another. As Alexis de Tocqueville noted, the character of the American civic experience was unique and unprecedented and a function of the liberated and self-reliant nature of the citizenry there (Tocqueville 1975 ed.). In Westernized and industrialized nations where the state plays a larger role – from interventionist to repressive – evidence of the same quality of civic society is decidedly lacking (Marzolini 2002; Carothers 1999). In his study of regional Italian politics *Making Democracy Work*, Putnam suggests that he is approaching an understanding of why certain locales within the rapidly decentralizing and modernizing Italian democracy of the late 20th century, quickly restructured their jurisdictions into sophisticated and mature democratic constituencies, while other areas of the country seemed more likely to find themselves governed by legislators that were more unresponsive and unproductive (Putnam 1993; 1996; 2000). The starkness in regional differences in Italy seemed to bear some correlation to whatever the nature of historic societal hierarchies were in a given region dating back to the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Of particular interest to Putnam was the presence of communal republics in places like Florence, Bologna and Genoa, where civic engagement continually thrived and where today the most dramatic and progressive innovations in Italian democracy are to be found (Putnam 2000).

It is the United States, to which Putnam returns, which provides the richest evidence in this regard, at least as it is understood from a perspective influenced by de Tocqueville. His *Democracy in America*, in fact, identified the same causal relationship between civic engagement and democratic verve long before Putnam, since the US has

traditionally been considered unusually "civic" and -- being a country where county dog catchers are often elected -- exceptionally democratic. The Americans' proclivity for civic association in the early mid 19<sup>th</sup> century was something Tocqueville remarked on at length:

Americans of all ages, all stations in life, and all types of disposition are forever forming associations. There are not only commercial and industrial associations in which all take part, but others of a thousand different types--religious, moral, serious, futile, very general and very limited, immensely large and very minute. . . . Nothing, in my view, deserves more attention than the intellectual and moral associations in America (Tocqueville 1975 ed.: 65).

Differences in the Canadian experience, so remarkably similar to that of its southern neighbour when it comes to most elements of cultural composition, highlights the distinctiveness of the U.S.A when it comes to this matter. The pervasiveness of the civic style elucidated by Putnam's definition of social capital appears largely absent from the Canadian landscape, a nation which, broadly interpreted, seems to emphasize less reliance on the community to find solutions to social and political problems, instead perceiving government as the wellspring of such remedies (Marzolini 2002).

Though most commonly understood as a sociological phenomenon, the richness of social network can reasonably be viewed also as an economic force given that, like the commonly used human capital or human resources, it primarily is used to imply that there exists an unaccumulated inventory of social interactions which are at some level quantifiable (this is safely presumable, for one thing, in light of the volume of Putnam's empirical statistics), and like other forms of capital, it can be made to be productive (Greeley 1997). Still, while it is no less worthy a pursuit to isolate the enigmatic source which would activate the social capital element to the gain of economic systems,

something akin, perhaps to Weber's Protestant work ethic (Lemann 1996), in the context of the approaches taken by Putnam, what is more pressing is to focus, rather, on the absence, or the decline of social capital. To Putnam, the critical consideration is not the emergence of vibrant democratic structures, but the weakening of a civil society initiated and accelerated by a loss of a sense of citizenship. Seeking edification from David Hume's fable of two farmers, prepared to watch much of their crops ripen and spoil in their fields rather than cooperate and harvest their produce together, Putnam is compelled to assert that the parable stands as a fundamental paradigm for understanding civic engagement: That a lack of fellowship between citizens will produce a self fulfilling prophesy in which members of society who suspect the worst from each other are destined to rationally defect and inevitably cause their ugliest suspicions to be verified (Putnam 1993: 56). That there is statistical evidence which bears out that there is exactly this sort of erosion in mutual support and trust in America is what lends the matter its urgent timeliness. Along with Schorr, there is, concurrently, persuasive evidence that there is a decline in the levels of participation among Americans in the sorts of voluntary associations – social, religious, political, leisure -- particularized by Tocqueville (Putnam 2000).

### Understanding Social Capital: Revisiting Putnam's Narrative

In order to more thoroughly examine the viability of purported social capital manifestations in virtual communities, such as those apparently at work within the Howard Dean Internet network, it is critical to first understand the dominating Putnamian narrative on the idea of social capital. Prior to the renaissance of the idea of Social

Capital begun by *Bowling Alone*, there has been relatively limited dialogue with regard even to the meaning of what social capital really is. Though Putnam recounts its first recorded use having probably been by a Virginian rural school reformer, L. J. Hanifan, in 1916, a broader sociological application would not begin until, probably, a sociologists' revival of the term in the 1980s (Putnam 2000). It is necessary to bear in mind that relative to the standards of most political and economic theories, the body of social capital work is relatively new.

It is perhaps not entirely unexpected then that Putnam's work, while received enthusiastically by a broad audience comprised of not only scholars but a good number inside the popular mainstream, a segment of society not normally drawn to academic sociological thinking (the year of the release of *Bowling Alone*, Putnam and his wife were written up in *People* magazine) served also to inspire a long overdue and somewhat excited discussion about how social capital might best be understood.

Putnam is not, by any means, making a novel assertion when he details the myriad explicit and implicit benefits that accrue to a society and its members when there exists an underpinning of vibrant social networks. Rather, he draws upon what he understandably perceives as a consensus approval of the social capital form and consequence that existed in an admittedly primordial form prior to his entrance on the scene (Putnam 2000). It seems entirely reasonable to most scholars that social capital is worthy at some level because it invisibly harnesses the collective efforts of a given society (Portes and Landolt 1996). If so, the effects to a highly networked nation may extend well beyond impressive voter turnout levels and the potential for more transparent and responsive governance, which tend to be closely related and that the society in

question will be relatively happier, better educated, healthier and more prosperous (all also very closely related) than comparable nations lacking the same level of social bonds (Fukuyama 1996). Others have argued for a correlation between higher-than-average suicide rates and societies with poor cohesion and that enhanced levels of social capital may be capable even of preventing heart disease (Kawachi 1997).

Still, it was *Bowling Alone* that would serve as the impetus wherein the diverse and plentiful functions and fruits of social capital finally begin to be seriously and effectively challenged by the sociological and cultural studies community at large. Previous to that, the unchallenging atmosphere led to a state wherein the idea of social capital, infused as it was with so many different qualities, became wholly indefinable, something argued by Portes and Landolt: "Indeed, the more social capital is celebrated for a growing list of wonderful effects, the less it has any distinct meaning." (Portes and Landolt 1996: 18) There is evidence that the 'Putnamian' conceptualization of social capital may in fact be a misrepresentation of the initial theses developed originally by James S. Coleman in his pioneering work *Foundations of Social Theory* (1990). There is an implication and evocation of economic concepts and theory (possibly even rules) since it shares many parallels in most writing to other forms of capital: human capital or ordinary monetary forms of capital. If this is the case then, social capital is available not only to be harnessed, which is the most common area of discussion, but must also then possess some intrinsic potential to take other forms: to be saved; to be spent; to be wasted. It may follow, then, that this imperfectly understood form of capital is not necessarily something to be considered a public good, but rather a private one: something amassed on an individual level for to understand it otherwise, as a communal asset and



beholden to all the influences therein, necessarily implies that “the resources that some individuals claim come at the expense of others” (Portes and Landolt 1996: 18).

Similarly, it is critical to realize that the way by which social capital is employed or deployed can be an entirely inefficient way. The existence of social capital, then, guarantees nothing with regard to the quality and quantity of output vis-à-vis the democratic process – only the potential for some output is something we can, if we buy Putnam’s assertions, be fairly certain of. To misunderstand this is to confuse social capital with its benefits (Portes and Landolt 1996).

In economic disciplines, capital and time are traditionally linked inextricably, with common X/Y graphs demonstrating the growth of things like revenue or profit over time. More to the point, capital, with regard to its efficient use, is frequently understood as part of a chronologically-based calculus; the “value” of any given monetary product is correlated directly to the time required to produce that capital. The commonly employed concept is called “net present value” and reflects the understanding that the ‘value’ of your employer giving you a paycheck today is significantly different than were she to give you that same cheque next year at this time. Following this line of thinking, we should therefore consider the concept of social capital as it exists as a trajectory within a chronology. Upon revisiting Putnam’s assertions in *Making Democracy Work*, for instance, Putnam underscores with gusto that it is, in his mind, the lineage of communal networks dating back ten centuries or more in the Italian communities in question, which were salient, even determining factors in how modern inhabitants therein were able to adapt to and benefit from democratic institutions. Presuming, therefore, that the American experience of social capital patterns, booming and busting as they do, represent

long-term and irreversible trends seems a hasty conclusion to draw. Qualities that Putnam would prefer to see imbibed in American citizens were present in abundance a mere generation ago and declaring them finally dead may prove to be an irresponsible move (Lemann 1996). Opinion polls in Canada have demonstrated a similar pendulum-like pattern when voters are surveyed about the need for increased social cohesion (Marzolini 2002). Cultures may and do characteristically exhibit signs of being perpetually in flux, considerable trends featuring “enormous society shaping impact are rare” and on the extraordinary occasion when they do happen, usually reveal diverging trajectories. (Greeley 1997: 68). Following the terrorist attacks on America on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, trends initially observed and recorded in *Bowling Alone* immediately began reversing as political consciousness and engagement among Americans were revived, with citizens becoming involved with more meetings, more community projects and, ironically, exhibiting heightened levels of trust in public institutions and other citizens (Putnam 2002).

### Greatly Exaggerated Rumours: Is Social Capital Really Dead?

It seems necessary to assert that social capital as our cultural bedrock is at risk in order to accept Putnam’s overarching thesis. The narrative put forward in *Bowling Alone* suggests that forever modernizing elements in our civilization, primarily as they relate to the way we consume media, are a destructive force to the hard-won civic society of America folklore. Such an allegation, while demonstrated persuasively by Putnam, with a reliance on empirical evidence, often in the form of data illustrating declining participation rates in activities centered around and for the benefit of the traditional

meanings of community are, nevertheless, vulnerable to subjective judgments and perceptions. The contemporary nature of the cultural shift observed by Putnam is sufficient, perhaps, to elicit some caution from the reader for the scholar must almost certainly come to even an empirical study predisposed in some ways by his own anecdotal and very personal experiences (Hansen et al 1998). The process of selecting the location where we seek to find evidence of social capital's erosion is in itself vulnerable to subjective influences (Wills 2000). As American culture advances, replete with seismic changes in the way we all work, relax, domesticate and consume information, it is not entirely inconceivable that the sites where social capital does exist may themselves have shifted, relocating from more established forums to unforeseen and possibly unseen locales. Considering the highly regimented and uncritical role of the media as political spectator in recent decades, it would be difficult to consider the past as anything idyllic with respect to communications and when compared against any other period in the history of humankind, while the present state appears to hold much promise from the standpoint of democracy itself (Sunstein 2001: B11). Moreover, when it comes to Americans (Putnam) assessing their own culture, one in which they were born and raised (as Putnam was) there is certainly a possibility that there may be some susceptibility to highly qualitative factors like nostalgia, something that Wills argues may pervade the methods used to ascertain the current condition of social potency, as baby boomers and their predecessors, Putnam's so-called "long civic generation" are affected by what he refers to as "good-old-daysism." Misty reminiscences of the golden age, commonly touted as they are in popular culture products like TV's "The Wonder Years" or even "That '70s Show" have arguably embellished the endearing qualities of post-war

America, while analogous narratives of a more current nature seldom have the same varnishing effect (Wills 2000: 34). Quite the opposite: movies and television shows based in the present day tend, like *NYPD Blue* and *the Simpsons*, to dramatize – or more powerfully, satirize – the contemporary. Methodologically, relying on Tocqueville's impressions to represent the state of American social capital in the nineteenth century and comparing it to evidence of its fitness today is as vulnerable to the same errors of looking distantly backward as attempts to accurately track climate change over two centuries: our measurements have advanced so dramatically that it is difficult to make reliable comparisons between the past and present. Just as the controversy within the popularized global warming debate – emerging in part from the uncertainty of putting side by side the sophisticated weather data of today and one-hundred-year-old temperature records measured utilizing vastly different equipment and circumstances at the time -- should give us an idea of the prudence with which we should approach Putnam's assessments about social capital.

Indeed, we must be mindful, for instance, of the myriad negative elements which are often part and parcel of the social capital phenomenon, particularly when we cast our minds backwards 150 years or so. The “social” of that specific period, we must remember, existed within a context of a highly inequitable and fragmented nation, racially, ethnically and economically, and therefore any ‘capital’ produced therein must be discounted accordingly. (Some might argue that the racial and class stratification of this post-welfare persists in an even more significant form today). The manifold benefits of social capital are created, as Putnam insists, only when there are strong social networks, and can range anywhere from ethnic ties to trade unions (2000). These forms

of tightly-knit organizations necessarily accumulate their strength not from the inclusion of individuals, but just as much from the exclusion of others, for there naturally must exist some form of greater nation within which these associations can distinguish themselves effectively. Traditionally, such unions have shown themselves to be highly susceptible to control and exploitation by elites which have been able to leverage the interconnectedness and more to the point, the interdependence of the group as a means of establishing a form of extra legal order (Portes and Landolt 1996). The Nation of Islam or the Ku Klux Klan both surely demonstrate stellar examples of proper social networks, though they unquestionably represent destructive elements to their host society. Exhibit, as they might, the archetype of the social capital model, these and other social groups, even those of a far less menacing nature, instill a conformity amongst members that is far more rigorous than the more secular mores implicit in the larger nation. In turn they risk contributing constructive societal components to the greater group at the expense of other beneficial ingredients to the democratic dynamic, as identified by Tocqueville, namely individualism and creativity (Portes and Landolt 1996).

### Community and Class: The Bias of Traditional Social Capital Forms

Locating sites of social capital formation effectively it seems might necessitate a recreation of how workable definitions around social capital are developed. The resonance that Putnam's work has found with the broader public are understandable when we consider the nature of national cultural memories and the reactions they can elicit (Lemann 1996). Moreover, though we can effectively critique some logical and epistemological elements in the *Bowling Alone* hypotheses, the suppositions contained

therein would find little of the reverberation within either the academic and popular culture were it not telling us something that, because it is about us, seems familiar. That is, society has eagerly bought into the *Bowling Alone* theory because it confirms our own experiences: we are reminded every election cycle that voter turnouts are in perilous descent, we all feel that our leisure time is in ever-shorter supply, that the precious hours we do find are increasingly capitalized by “privatizing” forms of media like television or video games, and there seems no shortage of anecdotal evidence that our social fabric is perpetually thinning and that our interpersonal networks are deteriorating (Putnam 2000). Whether our private encounters are truly signal of anything real, however, is not clear; evoking the climate change analogy once more, for instance, we cannot safely presume that because to us, winters “feel” warmer than when we were children, that global warming is the cause as there are too many additional and complicating factors – from personal points of relativity to the advances in the insulation of outerwear – to confirm anything. Returning again, then, to the question of how we are best able to go about identifying social capital deposits effectively, it might be useful to reflect also upon the *Bowling Alone* discourse and where it occurs. Precisely, it is not among bowlers. It is probably safe to say that is largely the academics, intellectuals, professionals or the middle to upper middle class who worry for the condition of democratic vigor in America and the relationship of it to the state of social connectivity. As Lemann asserts, it is a group rooted in the “bourgeois provincial” experience, migrated as they have from their hometowns to the metropolises, labouring in demanding careers and perhaps they are more susceptible to a sense of ennui. Because the *Bowling Alone* phenomenon resonates deeply with these people in specific, it seems natural for them to assume that their

experience is typical rather than unique, and part of a broad national drift (Lemann 1996).

If it is Putnam's instinct, as it seems to be, to "hold constant" the political and social organizational context going back to the 1920s, then it is somewhat disconcerting given the overwhelming societal shifts that have occurred in the same time period – the nature of work and the nature of leisure both having changed immeasurably since the days of the Jazz Age (Valelly 1996). Quantifying the metrics of social capital utilizing a fixed framework with presumptions rooted in class biases are likely to be especially compounded if the focus of measure consist primarily of measuring cultural properties affixed to characteristics of certain class groups (Lemann 1996). As a method of assessing the civic activism of the typical American family, Putnam relies, in part, on the membership rolls of staple community groups which arguably tend toward economic class stratifications --- American Association of University Women, B'nai B'rith, Scout leaders, bowling leagues, Business and Professional Women, Eagles, Grange, Eastern Star, Hadassah, Elks, Jaycees, Kiwanis, Knights of Columbus, Moose, Lions, Optimists, etc. --- while only one-sixth represent organizations that might exhibit more random collections of membership types that cut across class lines (veterans' groups, for instance) or like the NAACP, have historically been rooted specifically in the lower economic classes (see Putnam 2000: 438-444). It seems reasonable to suspect then that the negative patterns observed in the memberships of these groups are a function of demographic variations. The massive influx of immigrants into the US in the mid-century up until now; the soaring desperation of the American underclass over the last several decades; the spike in urban violence in minority neighbourhoods in the seventies and

eighties; the swelling ranks of the middle class -- there is an unquestionable collective effect all of them have had on the larger national community (Lemann 1996). Non-profit groups itemized by Putnam are themselves bound intrinsically to the dominant culture. Counter cultural and extra cultural groups -- Marxists, anarchists, even fascists -- operating outside the mainstream, remain, by dint of their lack of formal organization, transience and ostracism, remain unseen in the Putnamian analysis and thus, are excluded as observable metrics within the social capital methodology. If anything, these groups seem more inclined to orbit around non-traditional social nuclei, suggesting that broad and disruptive transformations in the way that organizational structures are mediated are likely to socially enrich these groups as much, or more than archetypal community groups (Franke-Ruta 2003). It may indeed be possible to find some examples in our era which seem directly to contradict the theses offered up by Putnam, though how prevalent such examples might be remains uncertain. Since the 1980s the numbers of restaurants and bars have proliferated in the United States, calling into question the notion of the predominance of "privatized leisure." Community Development Corporations have experienced and particular religious groups -- not necessarily those more established -- are seeing their popularity snowball in the same period. The state of youth soccer in the United States, which has seen membership double in the last decade and whose membership is tenfold of that in the early 1980s, coinciding precisely with the apparent acceleration of the decline in the numbers within the more traditional jurisdictions (Lemann 1996). Nor is it the least bit unreasonable then to imagine that this specific demographic trend is directly related to immigration patterns given that the sport's increasing popularity is something presumably in part imported from every other country



outside North America where the game enjoys tremendous following. Pertinent to this as well is the assumptions made by Putnam considering growth rates in group memberships. After all, many of the aforementioned interest clubs enumerated by Putnam have actually seen increases in the absolute number of members, but are said to exhibit regressive tendencies only when the growth rates are held up to the broader rates of growth nationally (Lenkowsky 2000). This might be uncharitably perceived as yet more of the alleged ethnocentric fallacy inherent to the social capital conceptualizations elucidated by Putnam since to measure the Elks or the Jaycees over time is to presume that these all-American organizations naturally appeal in the same manner to Asians and Arabs as they did to the Irish, Jews and Italians who constituted the major wave of post-war immigration in the mid twentieth century. Also presumed, of course, is the assumption that the groups were familiar to more recent immigrants and inviting to them.

### Renewing the Search for Social Capital: It's Always the Last Place You Look

Regarded for its benefits, social capital flourishes in the sub cultural and counter cultural movements as well. Tolerance of individualism and multiculturalism is the flipside of the social capital coin, while the community in question, particularly those which are defined narrowly, as in the aforementioned examples, may indeed seek the undermining of the state or stand in opposition to the nation or government (Brinkley 1996). In more benign settings, there are nevertheless myriad examples which seem to suggest that some of the stronger social bonds are frequently found at the regional or local levels, not the national and international level, as it seems safe to assume that historically, personal contact has

been a critical element in the formation of networks. Putnam's writing certainly suggest as much, while he is mindful of the almost certain connection between tolerance and interconnectedness, though there is little empirical proof to point to the seeming relationship between the characteristics of community connection and intolerance (Putnam 2000). Conceptualized as it typically is, it is rare to witness the idea of social capital portrayed as anything but a positive contributor to the work towards Western ideals of democracy, justice, freedom and social equity (Portes & Landolt 1996). Forms of social organizations are subsequently monitored and controlled by less democratic governments, emphasizing the connectivity between social capital and decent governance. This has extensive ramifications with regard to questions surrounding digital connectivity over the Internet, which, as will be discussed later, is seen increasingly by dictators and totalitarians as a destabilizing element and is regulated severely (McChesene 1998: 39). Still, it is social capital, not its mode of transmission, which is ultimately the subversive element, and has historically been perceived as such by even the most open societies, since, after all, the idea of activism has within it the assumptions of eventual change and disruption of the status quo, something which traditionally sows alarmed reactions amongst the elite classes which naturally see much benefit in the current state of things. In the United States, the Progressives' new forms of social work and ethnic alliances were commonly considered radical and dangerous (Wills 2000). Where we might therefore seek to locate the richest deposits of social capital might understandably be the places we would least be likely to look.

For instance: Can social capital prosper in the workplace? Following the logic of Putnam, the answer is no, that networks which are established at work are more

temporary and less substantive than the genuine social connections established in the extracurricular world (Putnam 2000: 170). According to this line of thinking, then, there is obviously good reason to reflect upon the growth in the role of women in the workforce, one of the most portentous social changes of the century, and, as Putnam has, view the seismic shift as a major negative force on the community structure as the changing role of women has resulted in a net reduction in the contribution to social networks, the contacts created at work being poor replacements for the local sewing circle or Mahjongg club (Putnam 2000: 194). Of course the implication here can be discomfiting: Understood and idealized as it is within the framework of the mid-century American experience, where women were overwhelmingly domesticated, the idea of social capital might be interpreted as a regressive concept, bound to outdated and prejudicial notions of a pre-liberation society, a stand-in for the unpaid labour of women, outside of the house and the shop, as community functionaries (Galston 1996).

Attempting to reconstruct the social capital idea, there is reason to reconsider the emancipation of a female workforce as a net positive contribution to the enhanced community since education and career, both areas which have historically been restricted for women, are also fairly reliable predictors of political participation, as voting patterns have borne out; that the skills developed in the classroom and the workplace, things like organizational skills, public speaking, administrative skills, have long been recognized, among men, as enriching the potency of community groups; and empirical data which shows that in the workplace setting, men and women both, are more likely to be approached and asked to participate in political action by their co-workers, while still no evidence seems available to create a link between the amount of time families have

outside of work to their political participation levels (Lehman Schlozman 2000: 14).

Indeed, it is a rather commonly accepted presumption that unemployed or underemployed individuals are less active in politics than the middle and upper classes.

If the idea of social capital is indeed predicated on the existence on a certain American social portrait which we have seen is entrenched within a chronological, ethnological and economical point of view, then it would appear somewhat unrealistic to expect to easily discover reconstructed forms of modern social capital. Once one has either exhausted or sufficiently questioned the formulaic approach to measuring the connectivity of individuals within our civil society, one has immediately deprived oneself in some way of the ability to make reparations. What's more, in light of the intrinsic qualitative nature of many sociological phenomena and therefore their natural susceptibility to fallibility, as with so many sociological conceptions, attempts to ascertain genuinely meaningful data concerning the social capital picture seems almost impossible, and indeed there is a growing chorus of scholars which openly dispute the findings of Putnam, either calling into question his scholastic methods or using the same or similar procedures to draw starkly different conclusions (see Lemann 1996; Lenkowsky 2000; Greeley 1997; Valelly 1996; Wills 2000; Walker 1996; Brinkley 1996).

Putnam deduces a widespread decline in volunteerism (2000: 128), while others note that volunteering has a history of rising and falling as regularly as the Dow Jones when measured using repetitive ongoing polling but, much like the stock market, has seen an overarching upwardly sweeping curve (Greeley 1997: 68). The decline in union membership is recognized by Putnam as a result of degenerating social capital while

others perceive the equation through the other end of the lens: that the decline in trade unions, first, contributed to the decline in civic disengagement (Valelly 1996). Even voter participation rates, so surely in jeopardy, may not be as endangered as common wisdom holds (Wills 2000). Add to it the increasing diversity of the United States populace, the progressive movements of women's liberation from the home and the gradual and nearly complete desegregation of the American society and the fragmentation of associations into more narrow ones (Wills 2000). So banal is the truism that things have changed so much in the last 40 years, never mind the last 75, that suddenly revisiting with melancholy an old snapshot of the lifestyle of yesteryear seems not only pointless but a genuinely illusory means of comprehending anything so bound to demographic trends, technologies and cultural mores. As Sunstein argues, "nostalgia is not only unproductive but senseless." (Sunstein 2001: B11).

### The Electronic Social: A Collision of Community with Electronic Media

Technically limited by a too-narrow comprehension in tracking social capital pools on the ground as they reorganize into unanticipated formations does not necessary obviate the potential to engage in some restructuring of our approach. As Wellman first noted, as long ago as 1979 on the eve of the computer's ascendancy -- in his attempts to redefine community and thus relocate the existing discourse away from arguments that traditional community was disappearing and which sought its salvation through conventional social means -- community can exist in a form free of geographic space. It might be sustained instead, he argued, by the proliferating network of cars, airplanes and letters (though today, his vision might better include e-mail and the Web as more potent types of media)

(Wellman 1979). Indeed, Putnam has acknowledged that while he remains unconvinced, his theory remains open to the potential effects of the advancing electronic media on societal connectivity and that the tremendous proliferation of telecommunication technology may possess potential as a “countertrend toward greater social connectedness.” (Putnam 2000: 166). And yet we can be sure the Internet specifically is having some impact though not entirely certain of the nature of it (Barber 2000). Social networks are increasingly mediated by new technologies, as we keep in touch with one another not merely by telephone but by mobile phone, e-mail, mobile e-mail and text messages, and chat clients (i.e., AOL Messenger) (Friedland 1996: 189). Online social networks are therefore best described as webs of relationships that grow from technologically-mediated discussions (Kimball & Rheingold 2000). The success of Independent Media Centres (IMCs) have underscored the potential for a dramatic reorganization of social network forms utilizing an electronic network nexus. As virtual meeting sites for counter-culture, anti-capitalist and anti-globalization activists prior to and during protests against the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization and the Group of Seven meetings in Seattle, Prague, Quebec and elsewhere, the IMCs, ultimately exhibited the traits of classic models of social capital association: horizontal in structure, open and functioning strictly as volunteer organizations, often affiliated to physical non-profit volunteer groups (Hamilton 2002).

That the world wide web is necessarily mediated via a privately-owned infrastructure and beholden in more than a minor way to interests of capitalist and/or state, whereas the quainter conceptions of social capital tended to revolve around neighbourhoods and religions (while entailing some private ownership, a person's home

is a decidedly not-for-profit enterprise) is remarkable as it portends at least the possibility that the web may not ever transcend the level of traditional media's homogenous and hegemonic nature (McChesney 1998; Miller 2002). Indeed, the empowering nature of the Internet has been something lucratively exploited as a marketing trope by the biggest corporations in the telecommunications industry (Frank 2000). Ostensibly democratic forums on the web, like political activist site Grassroots.com are, in actuality, for profit enterprises (Van Benschoten 2000).

The Canadian Federal Cabinet recently attempted to implement a national broadband strategy, aimed at connecting geographically dispersed citizens via high speed Internet links, in part as a means of seeking to address apparent social cohesion deficits (Marzolini 2002). Yet the Internet has been embraced and utilized with effectuality by distinctly anti-corporate and anti-state interests, something evidenced, for example by the effective use of Internet connectivity to mobilize, strategize and organize the anti-globalization protests begun at the World Trade Organization summit in Seattle in 1999 and later repeated in similar settings including, among other sites, Quebec City and Prague (Wills 2000). In this setting the Internet demonstrates its paradoxical nature: the medium exhibits many of the same privatizing tendencies as television in its ability to keep its audience homebound during hours of leisure, but unlike television, seems inherently able, when applied to that end, to be an agent of activity. Though this appears to be something entirely novel and unique to the web, it is not. Linkages have been made quite directly, for example, correlating newspaper readership to membership in community organizations (Stamm et al. 1997).

Other conclusions have been drawn, convincingly, about the ability of American talk radio, particularly in California and other flourishing radio markets, to affect political change. The California gubernatorial recall and subsequent election of Arnold Schwarzenegger are recent examples where observers have credited the potency of call-in shows in not only influencing public opinion but mobilizing political activity (in the case of California, the Internet “piggybacked” on the talk-radio movement as a vehicle for fundraising and downloading recall petition forms) (Fund 2003). The richer the information medium, we might then construe, then the more potential it contains to become more than passive. The Internet combines all elements of all media, print, audio and video, while adding greater levels of functionality, making it ever-easier to rally like minded individuals for purposes of good or ill – Osama bin Laden’s recruitment videos will presumably be that much more available and effective over broadband than through physical distribution methods (Friedman 2003).

The genuine power of the Dean/Meetup phenomenon has not been its limited reach to the “wired” constituency, but rather the facility to empower those passionate web-surfers to leave their computers and go out and locate off-line supporters and bring everyone together into a face-to-face meeting (Rich 2003). That talk-radio and the Internet both exhibit strong tendencies toward both McLuhan’s “hot” and “cold” indexes by delivering intensive and rich messages while still allowing the audience considerable opportunity to participate, may be critical to understanding why the assumption that electronic media is having a deleterious affect on the social capital infrastructure may be misleading (Rosenberg 1995).



Additionally, it is necessary to distinguish between the ability of the Internet to build and organize and the ability that any medium may have to mobilize pre-existing groups into taking some sort of manifest action. That the Internet was a critical tool in the establishment of the recently implemented “Do Not Call Registry” in the U.S, is a good example of the increasingly important role that the web is playing in affecting public policy, but has zero ramifications with regard to the web as a means of enabling social capital networks and the effects of those online institutions on public policy (Economist 2003: 32). In order to properly understand events like those in Seattle, critical to maintaining as loyal an adherence to Putnam’s conceptualization of the social capital idea as possible, is the need to differentiate those groups which came to utilize the Internet as a tool to facilitate a demonstration which would have just as likely occurred otherwise but under different circumstances from disjointed individuals genuinely motivated and organized entirely within the Internet domain. Faddish exploitations of the web’s coordinating power provide compelling examples of not merely the ease of connectivity that this new medium provides, but also underscores the way that this convenience has the potential to create something appearing similar in some ways to genuine social bonds, but in reality are quite deceptive. The fairly pointless “flash mob” experiments in summer 2003 were a perfect example of this illusion. Interested pranksters were invited to sign up via e-mail and then were notified with little advance warning, using the same method, to coalesce at a surprise location, like a toy store or a museum, and begin, at a certain coordinated time, to simultaneously engage in some perfectly ridiculous activity – like jumping up and down or croaking like a frog – only to disperse moments later (Kahney 2003). It is indisputable that what is on display here is a

most vivid example of the potency that the Internet possesses, particularly as it transmogrifies from a fixed medium, tied down by telephone lines or broadband cables, to a mobile one (many of the more reliable flash mobbers seemed to be those using handheld e-mail devices like the Blackberry, which provided them to be available more readily for the “event”). And yet, the term mob is so wonderfully apropos, for this collection of individuals were engaging in an unplanned and insincere demonstration, no more relevant to civic activism than the looters and vandals which so regularly run riot after some disappointing professional sporting loss. There was no genuine connection between the participants present before the happening, nor any shared purpose, and there were none remaining after the group melted away moments later.

While the Howard Dean supporters, connected via Meetup.org, have shown the capability of adopting the norms and realism of comparable physical social networks, they have simultaneously shown a propensity for digression, occasionally utilizing harassing tactics – albeit of a virtual nature, rather than a physical one – to intimidate opponents, employing mass e-mail campaigns targeted against organizations and journalists wherein pre-scripted form letter polemics, as opposed to genuine correspondence, bombard the e-mail inboxes of the target while some have gone so far as to track down the home telephone numbers of their targets, calling them at home (McManus 2003). The advocacy and activist ideals that are natural to civic movements on the physical level are ultimately absent from such behaviour, enabled by the convenience and power in the new technologies, as the recipient is unlikely or probably unable to read the barrage, consisting of thousands of e-mails, and therefore not able to

be moved by persuasion, but rather out of intimidation or annoyance, concepts inconsistent with Tocquevillian social capital principles (Taranto 2003).

The world wide web, so accommodating of anonymity, presents users, or the audience, with the option of inclusion or exclusion at their leisure, unlike the more sustained bonds of community and neighborhood, infused as they are with coercive social pressures, norms and interpersonal histories. The on-line community Alphaville, created by video-game maker Electronic Arts as an adjunct to their bestselling Sims game and populated by avatars (simulated puppet-personas controlled by computer users) provides a vivid example of the immediate subversion of social mores that can occur within attempts at on-line civility: the virtual city degenerated rapidly as avatars controlled by teenagers turned to prostitution as a means of earning substantial incomes, with none of the social or juridical repercussions attached to such behaviour in the real world; con artists and thieves proliferated as did abusive characters, while those community members who did find themselves banned by Electronic Arts' mediators were able to sneak back into the community using disguises (Gumbel 2004). There is a fluidity to the web as one can "log on or log off" relationships, organizations and whatnot, with virtually no consequence while floating effortlessly from one peer group to another, while pressures and norms remain suspended never enforcing any real or lasting consequences for the participant's behaviour (Shapiro 1999).

In Seattle and Genoa, then, the issue to be mindful of is not how many anti-globalizers actually showed up for the demonstrations or even how they came to be there, but rather, whether the mobilization represents a legitimate instance of schmoozing, measured necessarily by the permanency of the bonds between participants and the

depths of the relationships which remained for some time after the events were ended (Putnam 2000: 170). The web and attendant peer-to-peer technologies (text messaging, e-mail, and so on) have proven to be potent media in leveraging the power of the demos against the state. In the Philippines, in 2001, the fall of president Joseph Estrada, following his narrow escape of impeachment due to mounting corruption scandals, was spurred in part by massive protests organized largely via cell phone text messages. Demonstrations which resulted in the overthrow of Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic was similarly incited, in part, by text messaging software as was the capitulation of Indonesian president Suharto (Schultz 2002).

Fragmentation on levels as specific as those represented by IMCs and similar groups, however, also demand some additional consideration since it seems also to subvert the established notion of what formally constitutes social capital. While Habermas imagines “public forums” where a diversity of voices are drawn together by external structure and encounter one another quite by chance, the constitution of the Internet is something more refined, and is desirable to many not for its potential to bring together varying viewpoints, but for its appeal as a “technological echo chamber,” potent in confirming and entrenching one’s own views by organizing on micro-levels individuals who share common ideas and allowing these small segments to separate themselves from the larger group, something seemingly anathema to the social capital model (Sunstein 2001; Shapiro 1999). Van Benschoten notes: “We don’t get to pick our neighbours, but on-line individuals can seek out like-minded individuals” (Van Benschoten 2000: 185)

Rather than subjecting ourselves to increasing breadth of news and information, research has highlighted a tendency among many Internet consumers to go “narrow and deep” instead, focusing ever-keener on the subject matters of specific interest to them , only exploring them much more deeply than before (Kohut 2000: 68). On that point, there is little evidence to support any supposition that more active users of the Internet are any more or less informed about broad issues of public affairs than lighter users (Kohut 2000). It may come to pass still that the traditional understanding of the “mass” media may itself be doomed for obsolescence, forcing a reconsideration of audience consumption patterns to ever-narrower forms in light of customizing media technologies like TiVo, with television, or customized web portals on the Internet (Lewis 2000). A foreseeable outcome of this would be the further isolation of the individual from the larger group, with shared experiences occurring only rarely and probably by chance. Audience studies have discovered signs that just such a narrowing of groups by interest is already underway (Kohut 2000). The elimination of the geographic local as the epicenter of social coordination raises serious questions for the long-term sustainability of conventional social capital arrangements (Shapiro 1999). Historically, local media has proven the most potent in connecting with citizens and subsequently driving political action on the community level, always a more sustainable realm for civic participation than the broader levels of state or nation (Stamm et al 1997). Parochial interests, located commonly in the local realm, are where citizens most often locate and exercise democratic power (Almond & Verba 1963: 164). Research by Blanchard and Horan concludes that “social capital and civic engagement will increase when virtual

communities develop around physically based communities and when these virtual communities foster additional communities of interest” (1998: 293).

The emergence of national movements, made possible by the Internet, such as Moveon.org, speak directly to the transformative nature of new media in realigning customary activist forms, but a failure to adopt localism as a central organizing principle (as Meetup.com attempts to do) risk creating digitally-enabled social organizations that ultimately prove incapable of functioning in any meaningful way (Shapiro 1999: 14).

### Anti-Network Television: Examining Putnam’s Problems With TV

*“More television watching means less of virtually every form of civic participation and social involvement”* (Putnam 2000: 228).

So pervasive is the television medium after 60 years of unparalleled growth and colossal economic impact that any claims to comprehend the impression this technology has left on Western society (and others) given its arguably unquantifiable nature, seem nothing less than ambitious. Theoretical deductions, such as the one made by Putnam above, are valid insofar as these ruminations are all that exist in media studies, a field where even seemingly innocuous conclusions like ‘viewers generally enjoy watching television’ can be held up to intense levels of criticism and disputation (Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi 2002). Nor is Putnam certain himself that rises in television viewership are the sole and final cause for the apparently worrisome state of our collective contributions to civil society and includes the large demographic shifts pertaining to the migration of women out of the home and into the workplace, the tangentially related issues of increasing time

and financial pressures on the average US household, the exodus of the typical urban family to the suburbs and changing attitudes toward social responsibility and things related (Putnam 2000: 277-284). Nevertheless, those factors are marginal relative to the overwhelming and dominating affects of television, says Putnam, which has relocated the diversions of evenings and weekends, formerly spent at meetings and functions in the company of friends and neighbours, to private leisure time spent in front of the living room television (Putnam 2000: 283).

It is indisputable that the downward trend of those metrics employed by Putnam to represent the health of social capital and the increase of television's growth in audience and their time can be charted to show an inverse correlation (Putnam 2000: 228). At the risk of sounding glib, however, one could similarly compare the proliferation of fast food restaurants or the birth control pill to the level of civic participation and ostensibly draw the same conclusion. Indeed, coincident with the seminal age of television, essentially the immediate post-WWII era, there emerged some of the most transformational technologies, ideas and societal trends in American history. It is not entirely an unreasonable leap to suppose, for instance, that fast food restaurants began the process of gradual demise in the family meal time, resulting in the breakdown of conventional familial leisure structures which extended, in turn, to the community. Nor is it ridiculous to argue, similarly, that the advent of effective and convenient birth control for female use would contribute also to a major social shift entailing the reorganization of the American family's anatomy as well as the socialization patterns that emerge from there (Stacey 1990). Putnam's findings, based on reasonable logic and approximate associations are nevertheless as difficult to either establish firmly or discount entirely.

Moreover, the negative correlation established by Putnam falls short even of identifying the clear orientation of the cause and effect relationship, failing to eliminate the possibility that the equally reasonable equation – that the rise in television’s popularity is actually a result of decaying civic vigor and not its cause (Lenkowsky 2000).

### That Other Community: A Place for Electronic Media in Democratic Discourse

*“The Internet puts back into the campaign what TV took out”*

Joe Trippi, Howard Dean’s campaign manager (Rich 2003 : AL1).

Resorting then to the one enduring truth, we can assert with certainty that there is “more television watching” now than there was sixty years ago. Any deductions beyond that seem, at this stage, inherently disputable. And yet this remains a conclusion of great magnitude as it pertains to the social capital issue. Indeed, the uniquely one-way transmission vector that characterize conventional forms of media like television and radio or even newspapers perpetuate anti-democratic prototypes of centralized and top-down information flows. A most conspicuous irony is that technologically backwards societies or organizations, like Iran, North Korea or even Al-Qaeda, are the most likely to rely almost singularly on the technological prowess of broadcast media (Gibson 2003). Yet, singling television out as a uniquely harmful medium to the civic society, is to boldly qualify it as something intrinsically different and consequently foreign from all other forms of media. Consider, for instance, the contentiousness of an argument that might posit that all media in all forms has had a detrimental effect on American civilization. Indeed, Putnam does indicate that there is a peculiar nature to television,



ostensibly in its superior seductive power (Putnam 2000: 223). Nearly identical notions were, by the way, popular in the radio age as well, and yet Cantril and Allport's response, that "any device that carries messages instantaneously and inexpensively to the farthest and most inaccessible regions of the earth, that penetrates all manner of social, political and economic barriers, is by nature a powerful agent of democracy," seems as apropos to television – or the Internet – as it did then, to radio (Cantril & Allport 1935: 20). And yet, from a social perspective, telecommunications has demonstrated dichotomous natures, with the capability for both positive and negative impacts (Putnam 2000: 168). Humans appear innately predisposed to the habit of retrofitting novel technologies to established and familiar modes of socialization, adapted to new devices (Cox 2002: 29). More often than not, it is social transformations that have the most dramatic and sustaining effect on history, as opposed to political ones (Drucker 1994: 54). Subsequently a more thorough understanding of the spread of the electronic mass media certainly demands some recognition of the arguably central role that media has taken within the very physiology of the social grouping as well as the civic roles those groups then come to play. The media, long recognized, even in its non-electronic manifestations as an instrument for the transmission and dissemination of ideas and information, has served a historic function as a vehicle for community, essential for a large society to participate in a common collective existence, whether or not that society is capable of collective and united action (Park 1940: 683). The concept of "society" itself is not only bound to technologies of communication, but defined by its ability to communicate, far more than it is defined by its ability to interact, though the two capabilities work in concert toward common ends: civilians will interact and conduct transactions by their

nature, yes, but in order for a “society” to evolve, the communal participation in activities and the shared results require as a prerequisite the existence of effective communicative means (Dewey 1926: 152). The interactive mediums of the present and imminent future appear archetypal of the Habermasian democratic ideal which envisions sets of public forums in which a diversity of individuals come into contact with one another often by accident (Sunstein 2001: B11). This can easily be understood then as something not at all dissimilar, say, to the fledgling Internet chat room infrastructure if we allow ourselves some latitude. Indeed, the very nature of the Internet anticipates the social capital model, created, as it was, around a framework of networks, enriched, at least in some significant part, by the collective unpaid efforts of millions of individuals who utilize it for socialization purposes (Putnam 2000: 171). Nor does the manifestation of virtual community appear to discriminate ideologically, and parallel to patterns observed in classic socialization models in the physical world, the Internet’s democratizing potential can be and frequently is utilized by criminal or dangerous groups. As Rheingold has noted, “democratizing doesn’t mean that all the effects are going to be pleasant... You can make an argument that al Qaeda used these technologies – the Internet and mobile telephones and [their] enabling of decentralized self-organization to commit terrorist acts” (Skinner 2003: 13). Neo-Nazi groups have long managed the organizing potential of the Internet as a method of recruitment (Anti Defamation League 2001). The imminence of technological leaps in electronic media affiliated with the Internet, ranging from wi-fi (wireless local area networks) and text messaging to video-telephones, seem poised only to enhance the Habermasian content of the world wide web, given that these developments, more than any others in the history of the Internet’s development, work

toward freeing the user from their private, fixed base, at home or work, and focus in part on the social element of electronic communications as opposed to the historically salient applications which tended to revolve around productivity gains. The recent AT&T Wireless advertising campaign “Reach Out”, for instance, which ran in the U.S., portrayed individuals “being there”— at a piano recital, with family and friends – strictly via the virtual realities created by high-end mobile audio/video technology (Kummar 2002).

While marketing teams romanticize the personal gratification consumers will derive from such gadgetry, it is difficult, still, to conceive that a continued trend towards those highly attractive selling-features of mobility and connectivity will possibly result in social depredation. Has the relatively recent phenomenon of nearly-ubiquitous cellular telephone ownership fortified the connective bonds in our society or weakened them? Research seems to indicate that the effect has been largely positive in terms of increasing overall continuity between individuals and, more notably, that the rise in connectivity in the virtual space translates to deeper relationships in the real world (Hashimoto 2003). Recent research by Nie and Erbring into the civic mindedness and general political activism of Internet users, however, suggests that they suffer the same afflictions identified by Putnam among television audiences – namely apathy and social disconnectedness, suggesting negative consequences for social capital building (Nie & Erbring 2000). Yet, as Norris argues, it is critical to distinguish between types of users – between those who use the Internet for consuming pornography or playing video games, for instance and those who use it for more productive civic purposes (Norris 1996). Additionally, similar studies have failed to control for the amount of time users spent on-

line at work or for work-related purposes versus use for leisure (Halpern 1999). Studies by Shah et al have found, to the contrary, that Internet usage patterns among individuals serve as reliable predictors of levels of social involvement and while use of the Net for recreational purposes was “consistently and negatively related to their engagement in civic activities, trust in other people and life contentment,” the usage of the medium by individuals for purposes of “information exchange” – specifically, searching for information and sending e-mail -- correlated to positive effects on those same three criterion variables (Shah et al 2001: 141).

### Hey! Check This Out: Bloggers as Agents of Social Capital Building

A critical approach to mass media content in America today might reasonably deduce a glut of unproductive and unworthy programming (Young 1999). For the purposes of social capital, however, meaningful and profound interchange is not a prerequisite and can exist in a multitude of manifestations, including the most shallow and insincere exchanges between members of a group (Putnam 2000: 9). Consider also the number of hours each day devoted on television and radio to news-style programming, a category which might reasonably, by a less than strict definition, include things such as morning wake-up shows, call in shows, newsmagazine programs (20/20, Dateline, etc.) formal news reports, and 24-hour news channels and even entertainment gossip shows – essentially anything which loosely orbits the world of current events. This type of show has been in gradual decline in terms of its dominance of the airwaves (particularly in the case of the more substantive programs) but should remain a principal consideration when we consider the implications of news as it informs our societal make-

up (Auletta 2001). Specifically, with regard to Putnam's somewhat one-dimensional categorizations of television, research by Shah et al has suggested that while television watching generally can be correlated to declining levels of civic participation, those who utilized the medium primarily as means of gathering hard news (i.e. local and national news programs) found it facilitated their civic engagement (Shah et al. 2001). If we accept the basic premise of "news as a form of knowledge," then it is necessarily the consequence of news to evoke from the audience a collective response, as Park elucidates:

The first typical reaction of an individual to news is likely to be a desire to repeat it to someone. This makes conversation, arouses further comment, and perhaps starts a discussion...The clash of opinions and sentiments which discussion invariably evokes usually terminates in some sort of consensus or collective opinion –what we call public opinion (Park 1940: 677).

The influence of news on the individual are the element that predominantly culminates in the manifestation of political participation when it is introduced into social relationships and, returning to the two-step flow model of communication, it is precisely the role of the mass media to inform and influence "opinion leaders," who in turn exploit positions of privilege and power to induce the group into action (Katz & Lazarsfeld 1955: 151). And it is here we must consider then, the proliferation on information sources brought about by the growth of the world wide web as it pertains particularly to the Katz and Lazarsfeld paradigm. If we can assert with confidence that it is news – as opposed to history or politics – that makes political action feasible then any express change in the

way that news is gathered and disseminated would reasonably lead to subsequent disruptions in the way political action is manifested (Park 1940: 678).

On-line and off-line, far from being independent, become mixed as Haythornwaite notes, “online articles and web pages may lead to e-mail which may lead to collaboration and meetings both virtual and face-to-face” (Haythornthwaite 2002: 5<sup>th</sup> paragraph). The larger the number and more available the news sources are to opinion leaders, the more likely these privileged individuals are likely to be stirred and the greater the resources there exist for them to motivate their peers. More recent forms of news delivery on the Internet provide for the convenient sharing of articles as well as video and audio segments, endowing opinion leaders with sophisticated tools to effectively program the media consumption of willing cohorts merely by selectively gathering personal portfolios of news items and combining it with the harnessed distribution potency of e-mail. The tremendous growth in web blogs, called blogs, -- online diaries of news and/or opinion, updated regularly by bloggers of prominence ranging from the famous to the unknown -- serves only to concentrate further the programming process of opinion leaders. Blogs are often heavy in political content and are individual clearing houses, linking readers to news items from international websites which is selected first and then filtered immediately through the bloggers editorial perspective, enabling bloggers to assume the role of news editor and interpreter for the audience (Crabtree 2002). The potency of cross hyper linking is something Foot and Schneider argue has become a major component of political-oriented websites (Foot & Schneider 2003). Opinion leaders are able to essentially to ally themselves with sympathetic bloggers who effectively take on the role of opinion super-leaders, gathering and organizing news and

information, contextualizing it with opinion. Opinion leaders later pass information on to the lower-level opinion leaders that constitute the audience to be absorbed and passed along again to the opinion-followers in the form of e-mail or verbal exchange. In actuality, most bloggers develop loyal and interactive audiences who often develop a rapport with the blogger and, in turn, contribute items for their consideration and possible dissemination, enhancing the opinion-circuit (Clyde 2002). Unlike television, newspaper or radio, however, the medium appears particularly virulent when the message is one of strong emotion, as moderate messages likely could not inspire opinion leaders to disseminative behaviour the way that exceptionally loaded or outrageous messages would, which helps explain the success of Dean, who is known for being the angry Democratic candidate (Rich 2003). The Meetup forum has been co-opted, for example, by all Democratic candidates, following Dean's lead, but events for candidate Dick Gephart failed to attract enough sign-ups and were cancelled before they began (Meetup, Gephart Home Page 2003). The 2003 scandal at the New York Times over plagiarizing journalist Jayson Blair provides an edifying example: the revelations about Blair were driven into the mainstream by the sustained efforts of bloggers who were eager to push ahead with a story that the mainstream press had largely avoided (likely out of self interest) until the groundswell became something neither the Times nor other outlets could reasonably ignore (Levey 2003). Attempts by the Chinese government to conceal the outbreak of the SARS crisis of 2003, millions of Chinese nationals were able to gather as well as distribute information about the virus' spread – Internet traffic rose 40% during the emergency and cell phone traffic rose by 30% and the government's attempt to enforce regulations banning "rumours about SARS" being spread on blog sites and via

instant text messaging were unheeded and proved futile (Gittings 2003). Channel 2, a Japanese news blog which relies on news tips from readers, as opposed to mainstream sources, has similarly demonstrated the ability of the blog medium to bypass corporate media gatekeepers while utilizing opinion leaders to cultivate an audience:

We once could only get information through mass media filters, such as newspaper companies or TV stations. We could send a letter with some kind of information disclosure to a newspaper, but whether they would pick it up in the papers depended on the editor's decisions. It can be said that only the information convenient to the media was reported. However, there is a lot of interesting news that the mass media won't pick up. Let's say there is a person who wants to tell certain information, and then he posts it on Channel 2. If the news is really interesting, there should be people who are intrigued by it, then they will respond to it, getting more attention. It's the users who decide the value of the news on Channel 2.

- Hiroyuki Nishimura, founder of Channel 2 (Japan Media Review 2003: 4th response)

Nor however is it therefore safe to assume that the blogger necessarily represents a purer form of news: The Howard Dean campaign, though rhetorically endorsing of the Internet's connection to the grassroots-level of political will has nevertheless begun paying bloggers for the enthusiastic pro-Dean missives they post on their websites, highlighting a potential for corruptive influence that is largely frowned upon, at least in such formal terms, in old media forms (Bolton 2003). Significantly, however, audience studies show that generally, many online readers regard the credibility of on-line news sources as equally trustworthy, or even more trustworthy, than traditional channels of information (ONA Digital Journalism Credibility Study 2002).



### Divide and Control: The Political Economy of the Virtual Community

Whether the possibility for “virtual social capital” is realizable requires a critical understanding of the political economy differences that must necessarily exist in social interactions that take place in an environment mediated by technology, similar as they may be to non-electronic forms of social interaction. A phantom of commercial interests lurks unseen below the surface of every e-mail and website, regardless of how anarchic in nature the author’s own content may be, and it will remain there permanently, for it is necessarily required as an interlocutor in the development and proliferation of networks and their attendant technologies (Hamilton 2002). Subsequently, critics of virtual social capital must be ever mindful that approaching every instance of an electronically enabled organization requires the acknowledgement of the inherent presence of the ultimately Marxist-style conflict between users of the technology and those who control its means of production (Garnham 1979: 2). Once the reliance of virtual networks on oligopolistic capitalist interests is acknowledged, however, the discussion necessarily becomes one of understanding what potential remains for meaningful social progress. Divergent trends have emerged in the new technologies and, should increased levels of decentralization and democratization prove possible within the digital paradigm, something which appears nearly possible at times, the result might be an increase in the rate and density of public exchange which could threaten the control of information as a discreet and controllable commodity (Keane 1991: 162). Ultimately, the agency that consumers continue to exercise when adapting to newer technologies can provide some immunity to the dominant hegemonic forces while potentially furthering more democratic causes (Friedland 1996: 187). Hall and Hamilton have both highlighted means by which the

audience is capable of subverting seemingly inscrutable communications to their own personal ends and, as two-way media, the net and other recent technologies, seem open to the Gramscian conceptualization of social arrangements as a product of the active process of winning consent (Hamilton 2002; Hall 1980). This sort of phenomenon necessarily takes place within the dominant framework, however, consisting largely of only limited and generalized dialogues reformulated and recirculated as repetitive patterns of inquiry (Donohue et al 1995). Agency is forced to manifest itself within strictures bound to middlebrow ideas made tolerable for the “crowd mind” (Cantril & Allport 1935: 21).

The global communications revolution, characterized as it is by myths of empowerment and freedoms, can be understood not merely for its technological and cultural ascendancy but as a phenomenon of psychology, entrancing the masses, corporations and states equally and enticing all to devote significant resources to exploit it effectively (Frank 2000). Amidst a veritable renaissance in scientific application, few governments or business were prepared to allow themselves to be left in the dust as markets and mechanisms merged to create a utopian communications infrastructure, and worked diligently to rapidly develop domestic telecommunications infrastructures while deregulating markets, enabling the colossal mergers of media and telecom interests which exemplified the late nineties (Cox 2002).

That the “digital frontier” would emerge as a welcoming and barrier-free space exclusively designated for the sharing of ideas and knowledge, loyal to the Habermasian ideal, seems particularly unrealistic when it is understood as the product of communion between the rather selfish interests of commerce and state: rulers, no matter how democratic, will naturally eschew social forces which undermine the status quo,

particularly when it comes in the form of empowering the formerly disenfranchised, while commerce tends to gravitate naturally to technologies because they entrench control and thus, profitability (Garnham, 1979: 20). There exist clear indications that the new media space is something coveted by not only state-level governments and multinational corporations but by international bodies, like the UN, as well, all of them, ostensibly, with an eye to gaining some form of control (Thierer & Crew 2003). The theoretical feasibility of centralized control, while not yet realized, has produced a rapid population of the web by the same privileged groups which command other forms of more conventional media (Hamilton 2002). Clearly, were the total subjugation of the Internet by corporate interests to occur, it would represent merely a further entrenchment of concentrating media power among the dominating few, the latest stage in an eventful history of media consolidation which has resulted not only in homogenized ownership but also the gradual and sustained deliquescence of quality, in-depth and balanced news reportage (see Bagdikian 1992; Gitlin 1996; Kovach & Rosenstiel 1999; Miller 2002; Murdock 2000; Schiller 1996; Winter 1997). The possibilities for virtual social capital then are innately compromised from the start by the underlying capital and control-centric goals of those organizations which provide the grounds upon which such a phenomenon might find purchase.

Seemingly anarchic outgrowths, such as illegal file sharing software like Kazaa, remain beholden to dominant interests, capable of operating only within the Microsoft-controlled Windows environment, benefiting some corporate interests at the expense of others, while open source operating systems which challenge Microsoft, notably Linux, have been unable to penetrate the mainstream in any significant way (Johnson 2001: 28).

Telecommunications firms which provide the backbone of broadband are, at best, indifferent to the content which they host, be it Viacom's, MoveOn's or Hezbollah's (Hamilton 2002). Though more than likely, they are predisposed to prefer the status quo-friendly Viacom over others as institutional forces habitually shun contrivances which cede any portion of the fixed quantities that represent control to individuals, something which has played little role in obstructing socialization patterns in the past, but could make a greater impact on any social capital formations which are based in cyberspace (Shapiro 1999: 11).

Nor are the effects potentially limited only to virtual interpersonal networks: the success of hegemonic forces in appropriating the web to capitalist ends may prove to be predicated, in fact, upon the failure of the web to evolve into a vehicle for genuine social organization, as consumers who fail to exploit the new technologies for meaningful gains and instead, allow themselves to grow beholden to powerful interests, effectively cede even greater control to capital, translating into increased attrition of democratic supports everywhere (Shapiro 1999: 11). The pull of undemocratic impulses, created by the subliminal machinations of corporation and state and the inherent sophistication of high-tech communications networks arguably renders these formations most vulnerable to intrusive measures aimed at overt control and monitoring at work and ultimately, at home (Anderson 1999: 68). One recent study suggests that nearly three-quarters of the largest corporations in America monitor employees electronic conduct, including investigating e-mail correspondence, instant messages, web consumption patterns, reading computer files and tapping telephone conversations, utilizing technology capable of capturing screen

images on employee monitors and logging employee keystrokes to transcribe their missives (Witham 2003).

While the Internet retains legendary associations to freedom in the common public perception, the increasing reliance of consumers on Internet-based technologies (including the recent wave of Voice Over Internet Protocol – essentially conventional telephone traffic digitized and routed over Internet networks instead of phone lines) actually increases the likelihood of Foucault's panoptic society, a virtual Big Brother state, potentially depriving the citizen of autonomy with implications for their professional as well as social and cultural existence (Gandy 1994). Autocratic and oppressive regimes famously employ technologies which meaningfully interfere with the ability of citizens to exploit the communicative possibilities inherent in newer technologies while taking advantage of parallel and attendant technologies to redouble the state's overbearing power, belying the fabled vision of the net as a naturally ungovernable province (McChesney 1998: 39). As Garfinkel argues:

Many people think the Internet can never be subjected to centralized control. Wasn't this global network built to withstand a thermonuclear attack? Doesn't it treat censorship as damage and route around it? So goes popular Net mythology. But in reality, the Internet is a human institution. And like a corporation, nation, or family, it can be led astray (Garfinkel 2003: 30).

Notably, the subjugating practices of states are frequently abetted by the corporate entities which enable the on-line experience. In 2002 Amnesty International identified 33 companies, including AT&T, Microsoft and Sun Microsystems, that are complicit in work by governments, like China, to monitor web use and censor on-line content (Schultz

2002). Institutional changes to civil rights laws in the United States made in response to the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks has resulted in regulatory control and monitoring in that country, with increased usage of systems like Carnivore which eavesdrops on e-mail traffic and logs the web usage of targeted individuals (Schultz 2002). Non-cable television providers like DirecTV and TiVo (which, thanks to technologically advanced interactive features allow subscribers to not only watch television, but shop interactively through their TVs) under Section 215 of the Patriot Act, legally required to submit to federal requests for viewing and shopping records of individual citizens without notifying the surveillance targets (Swann 2003).

Paradoxically, the celebrated bilateral nature of newer media, particularly the Internet, have propelled to a state, according to Gibson, of “absolute informational transparency,” wherein the possibility of Orwellian intrusion into the private sphere is democratized, with individuals – as well as states and corporations – steadily losing degrees of privacy, with all sorts of entities, the citizen, the governor and the CEO, accessing and compiling personal and strategic information about others while simultaneously ceding their own confidentiality (Gibson 2003: 25). States may employ Internet technologies as surreptitious means of unofficial warfare against other states, as the United States is currently doing by distributing among Chinese citizens illegal software allowing web users there to circumvent government-imposed firewalls to access news and information freely available on the web but banned in China (Festa 2003). The “collapse of the inconvenient” enabled by the Internet has, moreover, jeopardized physical social networks as well. Consequential to the popularization of digitized information by state and corporate interests is a deleterious societal effect as the new

medium is gradually introduced into real-world communities, and neighbours are able to effectively violate social boundaries unimaginable in more traditional community settings through the act of “Googling” their acquaintances (using the powerful Google search engine to research people’s pasts and present) often revealing heretofore private details like divorce filings, college affiliations or signed petitions, which, while may have technically been available in the past through some determined digging through public records, have been rendered simply and immediately available to anyone with a web connection (Swidey 2003). In the past three years, the number of queries made every day to the Google search engine have jumped from 100 million to over 200 million, and the rapid popularization of wireless Internet access, done by cell phone or Palm Pilot device, individuals will have access to googols of information at anytime or anyplace. One wireless executive ominously describes the panoptic potential thusly:

If I can operate Google, I can find anything. And with wireless, it means I will be able to find anything, anywhere, anytime. Which is why I say that Google, combined with Wi-Fi, is a little bit like God. God is wireless, God is everywhere and God sees and knows everything. Throughout history, people connected to God without wires. Now, for many questions in the world, you ask Google, and increasingly, you can do it without wires, too.

-- Alan Cohen, V.P. of Wi-Fi provider Airespace (Friedman 2003: section 4, page 13).

Stalkers, identity thieves and commercial marketers are able to penetrate on-line social networks and exploit them far more surreptitiously and easily than physical ones, sometimes with tragic consequence (Swidey 2003).

Mediated social structures naturally also raise serious issues pertaining to the disparity of access to computers and the Internet, drawn most starkly across class lines.

Globally, the “digital divide” as it is famously termed, the uniquely affluent nature of the virtual is clear. In 2002, only a third of the world’s 591 million net users lived in the developing world, regions which make up roughly half the planet’s population; in Nigeria, to cite one specific example, only 17 out of every 10,000 inhabitants have access to online resources (BBC 2003: 5<sup>th</sup> paragraph). Even in the most affluent country in the world, there are wide gaps between the electronic connectedness of the lower classes and those Americans populating the middle and upper class, a peculiar complication of the electronic society which is less palpable in standard social arrangements (Van Benschoten 2000). The Dean/Meetup effort has been characterized by conspicuous racial segmentations, likely a product, at least in part, of the gap in technological fluency between Black and White America (something likely bound somewhat to economic stratifications, if not cultural terms). Polls show that 60% of US whites describe themselves as users of the Internet, while only 50% of Blacks accept that description for themselves. The same number of whites believe themselves to be “frequent users” of the Internet, and only 40% of blacks feel that way (Lester 2003: 6<sup>th</sup> paragraph). Van Benschoten notes that unlike off-line communities, the anonymity of the Internet actually works to disintegrate barriers to entry among disenfranchised groups, allowing “women, people of colour and those with disabilities to participate in discussions they might otherwise be excluded from.” (2000: 186).

Despite aims of transcending the physical, there exists as well geographic implications for virtual communities as denser and more sophisticated broadband technologies empower urban dwellers easier access to online society than rural Americans who more often rely on lower-tech telecommunications infrastructures.



Though, the chasm is narrowing: the use of high-speed broadband technologies is climbing dramatically in rural states. Since 1999, one measure of access to higher-end data transfer -- the number of "coaxial cables" -- has jumped in Iowa from 14,000 to 84,000 as of 2003, and in South Carolina, from 15,000 to 159,000 in the same period; digital subscriber lines rose from zero reported in both states in 1999 to nearly 30,000 in South Carolina and 29,000 in Iowa (Franke-Ruta 2003: 11<sup>th</sup> paragraph). Moreover, the disparity of access needn't be a permanent or indomitable barrier as public provision in infrastructure and public subsidies to advance the ubiquity of information technologies might feasibly be distributed equitably and democratically if public policy makers are inclined to do so (Schiller 1984; Garnham 1990). This intention was an ostensible factor in the Canadian government's brief consideration of a national broadband strategy. The eventual demise of the proposed federal programme, brought on apparently by a lack of public assent coupled with fiscal constraints at the time, demonstrates that by default, equitable access to electronic media forms will remain in the theoretical and that whatever social networks formed do emerge from the computer-mediated environment will be imbalanced in terms of class diversity (Marzolini 2002). Moreover, the mere introduction of technological infrastructures to underserved groups and areas will not guarantee the adoption and effective exploitation of these technologies, as barriers to usage will persist among those who lack the skills -- including technological and language proficiency -- and perhaps even the cultural predisposition, to utilize the Internet in a manner that would enhance community-building (Van Benschoten 2000). By the same token, however, this does not necessarily render the possibilities on online civility either pointless or impossible any more than a civic society built on a foundation of class-

specific social groupings like the Elks or the Business and Professional Women made America's post-war society a meaningless vehicle for democratic change – indeed, if anything, the “digital divide” in America may ensure that the post-digital social capital architecture remains loyal to the Putnamian conceptualization. Economic and class biases have historically played a significant role in social networks, even on the local and personal level (Putnam 2000: 192).

### Conclusion

That the assortment of new media in use today are quickly establishing themselves as a powerful vehicle for democratic discourse and action is undeniable based on the evidence of the Howard Dean effort to date and various political movements worldwide. Moreover, further advances in infrastructure and technological capabilities only suggest that these trends are bound to continue at least to a point. Less obvious is the contribution these technologies make to the enterprise of community building in America, the focus of this monograph. Clearly there are flaws inherent in these nascent organizational structures, including but not necessarily limited to barriers to access, meaningful applicability, vulnerability to state and corporate intervention and absences of traditional social mechanisms which have historically constituted the framework of on-the-ground associations among individuals. Yet it is also evident that those idealized forms of social capital forms highlighted by Putnam as more critical elements in the creation of genuine civil societies are themselves riddled with parallel imperfections inasmuch as they too skew toward certain economic classes, chronologically-bound societal constructs and can be susceptible, as well, to undemocratic influences. There

exists meaningful differences as well which favour certain social capital locations over others in both the virtual and physical realms.

Nevertheless, to date, successful social capital accumulations which have been enabled through the Internet and other telecommunication technologies have remained dependent on geographic and physical manifestations in the end, be they anti-globalization demonstrations or Howard Dean rallies. All have ultimately resulted in connected individuals gathering off-line to put political activism in motion. Broadly-based and geographically dispersed electronic networks have yet to demonstrably manifest themselves in potent communities. Ultimately, however, this does not detract from the communal networking potential of peer-to-peer telecommunicating in its potential to enhance social capital accumulations in America. Specifically, it is apparent that the Internet and other similar technologies can, if applied in the right way, have a restorative effect on civic society, de-privatizing the leisure time of individuals which heretofore may have, at least by Putnam's estimation, been otherwise increasingly relegated to unproductive use in the face of the spread of television's popularity. Social networking on-line may bear little resemblance to the traditional forms of "schmoozing" identified by Putnam and yet the product may still be the mobilization of community groups to take up a cause and promote the efforts of the Tocquevillian ideas that constitute civic America, with initial communal networking occurring on-line, rather than off, only to end up at the same place in the end. If virtual communities, therefore, are capable of remaining bound to the physical locals that remain the centre of their organizational nexus, it seems entirely reasonable that indeed, the newer media at least has the potential to enhance social capital building and revitalize whatever erosion

American communities have suffered in recent decades. The success or failure of this experiment will, however, ultimately be determined by the collective will and efforts of those within the community itself rather than the methods, be they newfangled or traditional, by which they choose to determine it.

## APPENDIX 1

### Censure and Move On Flash Campaign

In 1998, the website Moveon.org pioneered the 'flash' campaign, a rapidly organized and electronically enabled mass activism effort aimed at influencing policy. The prototype centred around the goal of ending the impeachment process of then-president Bill Clinton, who had previously perjured himself when he testified about an affair with White House intern Monica Lewinsky. The stated purpose of the campaign was to convince the US Congress to expedite a conclusion to the Clinton matter, which organizers felt was distracting the government from more important work, by censuring the president instead of following through with the lengthier impeachment process.

What follows is the timeline of how the original 'flash' campaign unfolded. It ultimately failed, and the House of Representatives did ultimately impeach Clinton:

#### PHASE I – PRIOR TO HOUSE VOTE ON IMPEACHMENT INQUIRY

September 22 – Petition site launched  
 September 29 – 100,000 mark reached  
 October 1 – 80,000 petitioners armed with their representative's phone and fax; asked to call  
 October 1 – 1,000 volunteers armed with phone and fax for all judiciary committee members  
 October 3 – Begin daily email of individual petitions to constituent's representative  
 October 4 – Compiled petition to each Judiciary Committee member, with comments  
 October 5 – Additional 50,000 petitioners asked to call their district's Representative  
 October 7 – Compiled petition sent to each member of the House with an email address (80% of districts).  
 October 8 – 200,000 mark reached  
 October 8 – Compiled petition hand delivered to each member of the House before vote

#### PHASE II – PRIOR TO NATIONAL ELECTION

October 9 – Compiled petition delivered to White House  
 October 13 – 250,000 petition mark reached: biggest web petition ever  
 October 20 – moveon volunteer pool breaks 3,000 mark  
 October 22 – 411 volunteer leaders selected for 226 congressional districts  
 October 28 – 20,000th "Move On" bumper sticker downloaded for printing  
 October 29 – Petitions hand delivered by constituents at district offices in 44 states.  
 November 2 – Get out the vote email sent to more than 250,000 petitioners – encourages officeplace campaign  
 November 2 – 500,000 impressions of "Move On... Vote today" banner placed on Yahoo  
 November 2 – 500 "Vote today" banners downloaded for placement on third party websites – circulation unknown  
 November 3 – Get out the vote email sent to petitioners again – encourages email passaround

#### PHASE III – PRIOR TO HOUSE VOTE ON IMPEACHMENT

November 18 – 4000 volunteers lobby judiciary before inquiry  
 November 19 – Email to petitioners requesting constituent calls after Ken Starr show  
 December 8 – Begin email of daily petitions to constituent's Senators  
 December 8 – 1-877-TO-MOVEON campaign – more than 200,000 calls made to Congress  
 December 12 – "swingvotes" email group offered to petitioners – 1,000,000 letters sent to swing members  
 December 13 – Emailing to 400,000 petitioners highlighting swing members in state with phone numbers  
 December 16 – Press conference and presentation of petitions in Congress by three dozen volunteers from across the country

#### PHASE IV – PRIOR TO SENATE VOTE ON REMOVAL

December 19 – "We will remember" pledge drive announced to 450,000 petitioners  
 December 21 – press release on success of pledge drive first day – \$5 million pledged to congressional campaigns

Source: Moveon.org

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